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ABSTRACT

To show that the bottom line for successful operation of a multinational company is understanding the cultural background of its employees and adapting to cultural change, this paper cites studies indicating that attitudes, communication, interpersonal skills, and motivation may be more important than technical skills in ensuring success in foreign countries. The paper reviews research showing the impact of cultural customs on multinational businesses and examines positive and negative cases involving cultural factors. It then stresses the need for more sophisticated communication techniques to keep pace with the increasing growth of multinational companies in the United States and abroad and with the cultural changes that these companies must be prepared to accept. The paper concludes that public relations students have the intellectual base necessary for consulting/communication positions in the multinational companies, and that these students need to prepare for global employment opportunities by taking more business courses, learning languages, and participating in internships with multinational companies. (Author/FL)

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THE MULTINATIONAL CHALLENGE: A PUBLIC RELATIONS PHENOMENON

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Abstract

The Multinational Challenge: A Public Relations Phenomenon

This paper attempts to show that the bottom line for successful operation of a multinational company is understanding the cultural background of its employees and adapting to cultural change. Studies are cited indicating that attitudes, communication, interpersonal skills and motivation may be more important than technical skills in ensuring success abroad. The research discusses the vast impact of cultural customs on multinational business and reviews positive and negative cases involving cultural factors. It points up the need for more sophisticated communication techniques to keep pace with the increasing growth of multinational companies in the United States and abroad, and with the cultural changes that these companies must be prepared to accept. The author concludes that the public relations students has the intellectual base necessary for consulting/communication positions in the multinational company. For the public relations student preparing for global employment opportunities, she recommends more business courses, language training and internships with multinational companies.

The Multinational Challenge: A Public Relations Phenomenon

As the global market place continues to change in growth opportunities, American corporations are becoming aware that their first priority in foreign operations is a thorough understanding of a foreign country's social and cultural traits. Culture defined is the normative lifestyle of a group of people. Various components of a culture include language, attitudes, values, beliefs, customs, religion, social organizations, education, technology, politics and laws, etc.[1] Consequently, culture encompasses a totality of human behavior; it prescribes the manner in which a person thinks, interacts with others and conducts his/her daily life. Thus, people find that it requires much effort to relate and to perceive what is meant in cultures other than their own. Most notably, the problem is the question of Schramm's theory of the speaker encoding and the receiver decoding the message from a different perceptual view and field of experience. An understanding of this cultural mix is the bottom line for multinational corporations as they strive for an ongoing successful business relationship abroad.[2] Findings of frequent surveys by management hold that skills rated most important in this development process are attitudes, communication, interpersonal skills and motivation.[3] In addition, Moran (1983) who has evidenced a constellation of cross-cultural problems, maintains that, "It's most often the interpersonal, intercultural relations that fail, not technical business consideratio...."[4] Thus, it is often the case that cultural factors can result in

misunderstanding and miscommunication; these results cannot be easily changed by formal education or even by language skills.[5]

Realistically speaking, only by creating synergy with a foreign market can a corporation hope to serve both the company and the public interest. What are the benefits gained from an international economy? One specific short term goal is employment.[6] For instance, many of our students will be making their careers with multinational corporations. Moreover, social, political and economic opportunities are long term goal considerations. In 1968 the head of one corporation predicted, "half of the business volume of United States companies will be coming from foreign markets by 1985."[7] John Meek, President of Edelman International Corporation, maintains, "Multinational Companies clearly have the power to solve most of the world's economic problems."[8]

This paper proposes to examine some case studies of multinational corporations and the challenges presented when the missing links of their client's cultural background; i.e., work ethic, customs, etiquettes, and attitudes, cause a temporary or permanent crisis in the business relationship. Also, it cites cases that explain the success for operations when these cultural factors are considered. Finally, it explores the implications that the public relations student's aptitude of monitoring change is particularly designed for a training/consulting position in a multinational corporation at home or abroad. The public relations student's tools including backgrounding research, sensitivity to public opinions, communication skills, and the

ability to anticipate change could prove to be an indispensable force for employment opportunities not only in America, but throughout the world.

Review of Cases In The Literature

Although examples in the literature are extensive, the volume has not seemed to fulfill the much needed solutions to the cultural problems that arise in the multinational organization. From the outset, behavioral scientist have found that a person's perceptual criteria, inclusive of culture, national history and individual physiology, has a definite effect on information received. In communicating with others we fail to see things from many perspectives. Unfortunately, we mistakenly perceive other people as being like we are. "Americans assume that if someone agrees with them, that person likes them; disagreement implies rejection."[10] Even though this perceived assumption of agreement is functional for us, it may not be so for another culture. Furthermore, attitudes toward work or the work ethic also differ.[11] Therefore, misunderstanding and miscommunication between cultures may create feelings of offense or neglect in this climate of change.

An overview of recent cases in the literature highlights some changing global assessments. Nestle's infant formula marketing practices is a classic example of ongoing multinational repercussions and global controversy resulting from cultural misinterpretation. An international boycott was initiated against Nestle, focusing on the ethics of their marketing practices in third world countries.[12] The activists maintain that their powdered baby

formula is so expensive that mothers often dilute the mixture causing malnutrition in infants. Moreover, consumer advocate reports show this formula can contribute to illness and a higher mortality rate of infants in underdeveloped countries.[13] Nestle endured this international boycott for seven years before it was resolved.

Misunderstanding created serious hostility in May, 1982 between Saudia Arabian and American partners of a United States manufacturer of high-tech equipment. The Americans were abruptly disengaged from the Middle East market. The severed relationship had nothing to do with the quality of the product, the price, or the business expertise. It was the inability of the two spokespersons to encode and decode the message according to each other's cultural perceptions.[14] Unfortunately, the American partner could not adapt to the concepts and attitudes of his Saudi partner.

Not only is the task of adapting to different cross cultural attitudes challenging, but the most obvious and stringent cultural difference is understanding the precision of the language. Since language is a reflection of the culture it represents, each region has a variable in usage customs. Consequently, this variable in interpretation can be most costly in advertising.

Wittenberg notes a specific instance when market researchers were quite chagrined when the "Nova," a compact car, was not selling in Latin America. Despite high sales in European countries, the company neglected to research the background data in Latin countries. They failed to uncover the fact that "Nova" in Spanish means, "It doesn't to."[15] Needless to say, the car did not sell.

Marketing Strategies

Seemingly similar accounts have proved to have positive results when the host organization diligently researches its client's specific culture and lifestyle. Nowhere is this more noticeable than with the seller of personal consumer products. In this instance, it is imperative for the organization to identify the cultural differences that directly affect its marketing. For example, Gillette International is a case in point of a company that was especially sensitive to cultural perceptions of status and material goods. Recognizing that toiletries are personal and specific to each culture, Gillette appealed to the public interest and persuaded the people that its product could contribute to their way of life. The company's research revealed that the name of their razor Trac II did not translate the image that it wished to convey in the Romance language of the European market. Consequently, by changing the name to G II in France and by being flexible in individual European cultures, G II continues to have an effective market. Moreover, Gillette's strategy of monitoring each unique cultural audience accelerated its growth and opened the market for some of the other products of the company.[16]

Avon exemplifies an organization that utilizes flexibilities in its marketing techniques. For instance, when continual monitoring revealed that over half of its sales were coming from the international market, the company focused on changing a customary marketing technique in order to reach a specific public.

> . . . Avon's traditional marketing approach in 32 countries is to sell only in the home through independent sales representatives. However, we had to be flexible to enter the People's Republic of China, where we have become the first non-Chinese cosmetics company to be permitted to manufacture under our own brand name. But we are selling in Chinese department stores. A lack of flexibility would have denied us entry into a country with over one billion people.[17]

Time, A Communication Barrier

Several reviews have offered global assessments on the perception of time as a barrier to communication. For example, South American countries prefer to become friends before they talk about business.[18] Furthermore, the idea of a deadline is not necessarily a part of the work ethic in some foreign countries. This explains why employees cannot understand the American's obsession with a time schedule.[19] It is no wonder, then, that by accepting the Chinese view of time, Otto Clark, from a small copy corporation, aced out Xerox and four Japanese bidders by using patience and working at "a snail's pace."[20] Moreover, time is also not considered a part of their value system for people reared in the Moslem faith since they purport that Allah or God has complete control of their life and time.[21]

Foreign Company in America

For purposes of comparison, it is only fair to identify similiar cultural barriers for the multinational organizations that enter the United

States. They, too, experience perceptual difficulty in relation to the American culture. Furthermore, in order to instill confidence and trust, they must articulate what their products and services can do culturally. The following case is a typical example of how the cost of failure can be very high if one nation views another as a zero sum game where one's gains must come at another's cost.[22]

When the French car makers assumed the management of the American Motors Corporation in Detroit, they had to spend as much effort on sensitivity to cultural change as to restoring the company to a profit position. One American vice-president resigned and joined a competitive company when two French executives invited him to dinner and excluded him from the conversation by talking in their native language. Following the incident, the French president was concerned about a complete decline in the operation; therefore, he started more stringent measures of adapting to the American culture. He stipulated that his people should never speak French whenever an American was present. In addition, the French executives were taught to blend and model their behavior according to the customs of the Americans.[23]

Interdependence

In spite of the cost, the barriers, and cultural problems of foreign enterprise, the advantages and benefits may cause all nations concerned to recognize the necessity for interdependence.[24] Harvester, is a case in point. In the company's struggle to remain viable, it created a new corporate culture

of interdependence with its foreign subsidiaries by promoting local men to the top position.[25] Inevitably, this strategy is not only an economical device, but it brings local benefits of good-will and social responsibility.[26] Realistically speaking, as in the case of International Harvester, organizations must be willing to change in order to create synergy with each foreign market. Far less publicized, is the need to make a strenuous effort toward interdependence in order that all publics concerned will benefit.

Dun & Bradstreet and A.C. Nielsen Company's recent merger is a timely example of interdependence. Analysts speculate that this merger can be mutually beneficial to the state-of-the-art technology in numerous ways. For instance, although Dun & Bradstreet purchased four small information companies abroad this year, its customer service has been weak. "Nielsen's strong international reputation could help Dun & Bradstreet overseas," while "D. & B. has enough money to support new product development at an agressive rate."[27]

In another case, when Beatrice Foods Company came up with a new market plan to advertise all of its products under a general name, the company learned that some of its foreign markets were apprehensive. As a result of the change, the American name would be on their product, and from their perceptual view, that change presented a threat of becoming "Americanized." An attempt to establish the American name might cause the workers to strike and the consumers to react. On the other hand, the bankers welcomed the credibility and financial soundness associated with the American name.[28]

Internal Communication

The value and importance of human resources were the key factors in Ex-Cell-O Corporation's merger with McCord Corporation. This newly formed corporation created a family spirit with its 16,000 employees in sixty locations throughout the United States and abroad by assisting a local volunteer in editing a newsletter for employees, corporate community members and retirees.[29]

Another interpersonal strategy is incorporated in the personnel policies of Norway's Norske Shell program. For the purpose of monitoring the attitudes of its employees and recognizing employee dissonance before morale problems develop, the company surveys worker's viewpoints every six months. Not only has the two-way communication improved morale, but the survey revealed that it is easier for the manager to change his attitude than it is for the manager to change the attitudes of the employees.[30]

Notwithstanding innumerable oversights and difficulties Americans have had with interpersonal and intercultural problems, they still have the respect of foreign colleagues. In the prose of one British leader, the "track record of the United States--in business as well as in government--makes legitimate your leadership of the rest of us in tackling the world's economic problems."[31] Although this statement affirms our credibility with the British, we have not always managed the necessary cultural changes in some countries.

There is Something New Under The Sun

The era of change surrounds us as the evolution of satellite broadcasting, cable television, videotaping and computerism brings us in close contact with people of the entire world. This interaction with other cultures will have a marked influence on attitudes and behavior.[32] In attempts to survey current research topics in cross-national organizational studies, Roberts noted that there is a dearth of research regarding the impact of culture on organizations. (This area was cited as needing research attention.[33]) In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx writing in The Communist Manifesto alerted the bourgeoisie to the importance of being prepared to manage the inevitable changing world.

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society . . . . All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away . . . . The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. . . . National one-sideness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world-literature.[34]

Aids to International Understanding

Although it may take years for the state of the art to catch up with the increased business of multinational corporations both at home and abroad, the signs of greater cultural understanding are evident.[35] In the attempt to strive for global reciprocity in dealing with the many issues abroad, the

International Public Relations Association (IPRA) provides liaison services in managing media and employee and government relations with American firms abroad and with foreign firms in the United States. Their service offices are available to multinational organizations in forty-one countries.[36] Indeed, the IPRA offers a consulting service much needed by American firms abroad and by foreign firms in the United States.[37] Another source of advisement is the Fowler-McCracken Commission formed to promote international understanding in business and governmental policy making.[38] Yet another, the European Public Relations Confederation (CERP) with its three main standing committees provides services on ethics, training and public relations practice in Europe.[39]

President Reagan has budgeted 20 million dollars for 14,000 exchange students to share values and attitudes with other free world countries. This task force involves the International Youth Exchange Initiative.[40]

These agencies interface with others in an ongoing effort to improve intercultural communication in multinational organizaitons. As was emphasized previously, the cultural contact is an important factor in any international business venture; it is no longer a valid assumption that management principles are universal.[41] Unquestionably, "The largest multinational corporation can be nationalized in an instant by the smallest host country . . or it can be asked to leave . . . or it can be compelled to submit to a whole series of new laws and regulations," commented James E. Lee, Chairman of

the Board and Chief Executive Officer, Gulf Oil Corporation, in a speech delivered before the American Graduate School of International Management.[42]

Implications Ahead

It is apparent that multinational corporations must spend more time and training in instruction on the cultural customs of their foreign subsidiaries and less time on devising managerial techniqeus. Moreover, the training should be independent of employer.[43] Researchers cannot assume that there is global standardization cross-culturally. What may be applicable marketing for one country or section of a country, may not be appropriate for another.

Looking forward to a definitive answer to the cultural dilemma, personnel with field experience recommend that not only is an empathic understanding of people needed, but also an understanding of one's self. For instance, on a cultural awareness hierarchy specifically designed for understanding idiosyncracies of various cultures, self-understanding was first.[44] One must be willing to adapt to change and to the foreign culture. It is often the case that a person who is fluent in the language, but insensitive to the culture will experience greater difficulty than the person who is not so fluent in the language, but who is motivated to empathize and to grow with the culture.[45]

The literature voices a special concern for interpersonal skills development. Roloff defines interpersonal communication as "a symbolic process by which two people bound together in a relationship, provide each other with

resources or negotiate the exchange of resources."[46] As mentioned previously, researchers continually reiterate the need for the multinational personnel to show a genuine interest in the people and their day-to-day situation and to take time to develop a relationship with them.[47] Developing an interpersonal relationship is concomitant with providing a supportive climate of personal respect, warmth and empathic understanding.[48] Since individuals are the key factor in shaping and molding the image of any organization, interpersonal training in understanding and responding to each foreign client is needed. In order to have a lasting effect, interpersonally, it is necessary to reach people where they 'live' and to grasp their perceptions of themselves, of each other, and of the face-to-face situation.[49]

"But Times do Change and Move Continually"[50]

It would appear that as the global market place continues in growth opportunities, prospects for career opportunities for the public relations students are excellent. Ideally, since the overall communication needs of a multinational corporation might include a continuing program of background information in cultural characteristics, interpersonal protocol, marketing surveys, publicity and newsletters, the public relations students should be prepared for these career opportunities not only in America, but throughout the world.[51]

Recommendations for Future Education in Public Relations

In order to keep pace with the growth of the multinational market, education for the public relations students will continue to be in the process of evolvement. The recommendation for business orientation skills is dramatic. Kalupa and Allen's 1982 research indicates that there should be a "greater emphasis on business and research courses".[52] Furthermore, Black and Sharpe advocate that the future public relations student should be "thoroughly educated in the social sciences and management."[53] Moreover, in the Task Force question survey headed by Philip Lesly (1980) an important aspect of public relations surfaced as "the effective expression of management's position."[54] As a corollary, King and Wright (1982) maintain that there is an interdependent need between business courses and public relations in the curriculum.[55] Paradoxically, the Task Force study showed that out of thirty-three management texts only nine made a brief reference to public relations.[56]

Most recently, the report of the Commission on Public Relations Education endorsed internships as a requirement for educational experience and emphasized the merit of international public relations as a special-interest course.[57] Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the findings of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) "Gold Paper No. 4" which analyzes the future of education in public relations. This paper brings to view our international audience and strongly sanctions the importance of the public relations operation to world society.[58] The Gold Paper was written by educators and practitioners from various parts of the

globe and was designed for the purpose of improving standards of public relations education at home and throughout the entire world.[59]

Conclusion

This paper attempted to show that a multinational company can be severely hampered in its entire operation abroad unless it has the ability to understand the extraordinary change in the cultural backgrounds of clients and to adapt to the conceptual framework of each particular environment. Studies indicate that many foreign cultures are less impressed with entrepreneurial flair than with harmonious interpersonal relationships. Reviews of multinational cases, flawed by failure to research the cultural customs and were temporarily or permanently extricated from the foreign market, have been presented.

The suggested method for correcting global misunderstanding is directed toward specific orientation and training in the area of (1) self-understanding, (2) understanding the cultural environment, (3) interpersonal skills and (4) sophisticated managerial skills.

Each multinational organization could improve its business operation by using the tools and techniques of public relations professionals; i.e., thorough backgrounding research and exposure to the foreign culture, interpersonal two-way communication that generates interdependence and reciprocity, and program and planning for social and material exchange that is mutually profitable.

Further implications identified greater job opportunities for public relation students at home and abroad. Recommendations include greater curriculum emphasis on business courses, language training, and internships with multinational companies. To concur with the IPRA Gold Paper No. 4, we must be alert to present and future needs of our profession.[60]

Future research would call for programs specifically designed to study the impact of culture on multinational corporations. Such programs would include: internships with multinational companies, anthropology courses, increased emphasis on foreign language proficiency and foreign travel.

This is just the beginning; education has no calendar. Educational priorities will always be changing. The educators and the professionals should continue to be students and never stop learning.

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